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TOM ON THE CROSS

“SO YOU’RE THE LITTLE WOMAN WHO WROTE THE BOOK THAT made this great war,” said Abraham Lincoln to Harriet Beecher Stowe when they met at the White House in the fall of 1862.¹ Lincoln’s remark was far from facetious. The extraordinary impact of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* may have done more to arouse antislavery sentiments in the North and to provoke angry rebuttals in the South than any other event of the antebellum era—certainly more than any other literary event.

When first published in weekly installments in the antislavery newspaper *National Era* from the summer of 1851 to the spring of 1852, the story attracted little attention outside antislavery circles. But when it appeared between hard covers in 1852, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* suddenly became the publishing phenomenon of all time. With little advance notice and no reviews, it sold three thousand copies the first

day, twenty thousand in the first three weeks. Then sales really took off. Three mills ran full tilt just to supply paper for the book. Within a year it had sold three hundred thousand copies in the United States and three million the world over. By the time Lincoln met Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* had been translated into over twenty languages and had sold more than two million copies in the United States alone. This is equivalent to almost twenty-five million in the more populous America of today.²

The only thing remotely comparable has been the popularity of *Gone with the Wind*. It is no coincidence that both books focus on the great American trauma that led to civil war. Yet while *Gone with the Wind* glamorized the Old South and romanticized the Confederacy, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* helped shape attitudes that would compass the destruction of both. Although Margaret Mitchell’s novel influenced views of the South, of African-Americans, and of the past, those views are now in eclipse, and *Gone with the Wind* is read today mainly for entertainment.

Uncle Tom’s Cabin has its moments of drama, comedy, and pathos that enthrall the reader, but its engrossing power lies more in the message than in the medium. It is a morality play, a contest between good and evil, a clarion call for readers to buckle on their righteous armor to battle for the oppressed slave. “That triumphant work,” wrote Henry James who had been moved by *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in his youth, was “much less a book than a state of vision.” When Lincoln was wrestling with the problem of slavery in the summer of 1862, he borrowed from the Library of Congress *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a book put together by Stowe in 1853 containing some of the documentation for scenes in the novel. In England Lord Palmerston, who as prime minister during the American Civil War faced the decision whether to recognize and support the Confederacy, had

1. Raymond Weaver, introduction to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (New York: Modern Library edition, 1948), p. xi.

2. Moira Davison Reynolds, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Mid-Nineteenth Century United States* (Jefferson, N.C., 1985), pp. 11–12.

read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* three times and admired it "not only for the story but for the statesmanship of it."³

No, Lincoln's remark to Stowe was hardly facetious; her book did shape history. That is one reason why it is still read today, nearly 150 years after it first appeared. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is one of the crucial documents of the American past; to read it is to deepen and broaden one's understanding of the coming of the Civil War.

The Fugitive Slave Law, enacted as part of the Compromise of 1850, sparked the writing of the book. As one element of a complicated effort to resolve various slavery issues with concessions to both sides, the Fugitive Slave Law gave the national government unprecedented powers to reach into free states and help slaveowners recover their human property that had escaped to freedom. In some ways, though, the law boomeranged on the South. Although federal marshals helped slave owners recover 332 fugitives during the 1850s, this achievement paled beside the anger and resistance it kindled in the North among those who had not previously been noted for opposition to slavery. For most Yankees, the peculiar institution had been distant and abstract. The plight of freedom-seeking men and women being manacled and returned to slavery at gunpoint made this abstraction a flesh-and-blood reality. Many Northerners both black and white participated in several dramatic rescues of fugitives during 1851–1852, the very time at which *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was appearing serially in the *National Era*.⁴

Soon after passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, Harriet Beecher Stowe's sister-in-law had written to her: "Hattie, if I could use a pen as you can, I would write something that will make this whole na-

3. James quoted in Charles H. Foster, *The Rungless Ladder: Harriet Beecher Stowe and New England Puritanism* (Durham, N.C., 1954), pp. 28–29; Earl Schenk Miers, ed., *Lincoln Day by Day: A Chronology 1809–1865*, 3 vols. (Washington, 1960), III, 121; Palmerston quoted in James Ford Rhodes, *History of the United States*, 8 vols. (New York, 1920), I, 282.

4. Stanley W. Campbell, *The Slave Catchers: Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, 1850–1860* (Chapel Hill, 1970).

tion feel what a cursed thing slavery is." Stowe's reputation as a writer existed at that time mainly among her family. The mother of six living children in 1850, she had nevertheless found time over the years to write several short stories and sketches for small-circulation weekly newspapers and religious periodicals. Most of these had moralistic, pious themes. Stowe was the daughter, sister, and wife of Congregationalist clergymen and theologians, two of whom—her father, Lyman, and brother, Henry Ward—were among the foremost American divines of the nineteenth century. She had breathed the doctrinal air of sin, guilt, atonement, and salvation since childhood. These seemed unpromising ingredients for a best-selling novel. In addition, Stowe was overwhelmed with the duties of child care and the establishment of a new household in Brunswick, Maine, where her husband Calvin Stowe had just taken a chair in theology at Bowdoin College. Nevertheless, to her sister-in-law's entreaty she responded: "I will if I live."⁵

Stowe later said that a vision of Uncle Tom's death came to her during Communion one Sunday, and she rushed home to write it down as if in a trance. In this recountal lay the origin, perhaps, of her later assertion that she did not write *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; God wrote it, and she served merely as His amanuensis. But after Stowe became world famous, she gave different and contradictory answers to the flood of queries about how she wrote the novel, where she got ideas for the plot and models for the characters, and similar kinds of questions that bedevil renowned authors. What can be known with certainty is that in the spring of 1851 Stowe wrote to the editor of the *National Era*, offering a "series of sketches" titled *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to run for "three or four" installments. Like one of her most celebrated characters, the sketches just "grewed"—to some forty installments, subsequently reorganized into forty-five chapters for the book.⁶

5. Joan D. Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life* (New York, 1994), pp. 206–7.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 208.

Echoes of the fugitive slave controversy dominate the earlier, more tightly written chapters of the book. This section is climaxed by one of the most memorable images in all literature, Eliza's flight with her infant son across ice floes on the Ohio River. In Ohio she is reunited with her husband, George, who has also escaped from Kentucky. Aided by friendly Quakers as well as by a politician whose previous support for the Fugitive Slave Law is melted by higher-law Samaritanism, they make it to Canada along the Underground Railroad after outwitting pursuing slave catchers in a series of derring-do adventures.

Up to this point, about one-third of the way through the novel, the narrative of Eliza's escape has alternated with the second, contrapuntal plot: Tom's sale to a slaveowner farther south. With Eliza and George safely on their way, Tom's story takes over, and the focus shifts from escape northward to descent southward, more deeply into the tragedy of slavery. Here the narrative threatens to get out of hand in the multiplication of episodes to meet the inexorable deadlines of weekly installments. But if Eliza crossing the ice is the most dramatic scene in the novel, Tom's experiences in the South provide the sheer emotional power that literally caused grown men to cry. These chapters also furnish the novel's unforgettable characters: Tom himself; the cynical but sympathetic Augustine St. Clare; his hateful neurasthenic wife, Marie; their saintly daughter, Little Eva; Augustine's quintessentially Yankee cousin, Miss Ophelia; the incomparable Topsy; and, of course, the embodiment of evil, Simon Legree.

It is these characters and the dramatic themes they illustrate that make this novel as readable and meaningful today as when it first appeared. Stowe had a remarkable ability to portray character, mainly through dialogue and behavior. Her imagination and writing style are pictorial rather than cerebral; she imagined these characters as a three-dimensional picture—or a vision, as she would have put it—and somehow managed to transfer the picture to the reader's imagination. These visual images, like the musical leitmotiv in an

opera, become associated with themes of love, suffering, loss, death, power, subordination, courage, salvation.

The dominant theme, which links the specific evil of slavery with a universal sentiment, is the tragedy of forcible separation of families. This theme had an especially poignant impact in antebellum America. During the previous two generations, profound changes had occurred in both the nature and the ideal of the family. In the overwhelmingly rural population of eighteenth-century America, families were large and functioned as economic units of production. Children received little if any schooling and went to work early on the farm, which produced most of the necessities of life. But with the rapid development of commercial agriculture, industry, and towns after 1815, the middle-class family became increasingly a unit of consumption instead of production. The ideal of romantic love rather than economic advantage increasingly governed the choice of a marriage partner. The father went *away* from home to office, factory, or field to produce goods or services for the market. The mother stayed home to nurture children, who were no longer an economic asset as workers. Childhood emerged as a separate stage of life, motherhood as a sacred ideal; affection and suasion replaced repression and corporal punishment as the means of disciplining children. The birthrate dropped as parents lavished more love on fewer children and devoted more resources to their education. A "cult of domesticity" emerged to describe the ideal of middle-class America centered on the sacredness of home and family.

This domesticity became the focus of a genre of sentimental popular novels. The expanded literacy and leisure of middle-class women made them the chief readers as well as authors of such books. It was within this tradition that Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote. She aimed *Uncle Tom's Cabin* at the heart of middle-class, Protestant, family-centered America. And she hit her mark. The social and political importance of her subject—slavery—as well as her genius at creating character lifted this novel far above the sentimental clichés of the genre. Stowe wrung every possible drop of pathos out of Eliza's des-

perate flight to avoid separation from her child, Tom's tearful farewell to his family when he was sold south, Lucy's suicide when her ten-month-old son was sold from her, Cassy's murder of her two-week-old baby rather than see him grow up to be sold, and other harrowing incidents of forced family separation. As Tom holds his infant daughter and says good-bye to his sons preparatory to leaving with the slave trader, his wife, Chloe, cries out in anguish to the unwitting, chortling child: "Ay, crow away, poor crittur! . . . ye'll have to come to it, too! ye'll live to see yer husband sold, or mebbe be sold yerself; and these yer boys, they's to be sold, I s'pose, too, jest like as not, when dey gets good for somethin'; an't no use in niggers havin' nothin'!"⁷

In case readers missed the point, Stowe sometimes stepped outside the story to deliver a homily, or put in the mouth of a minor character the moral, as with a white woman on the steamboat carrying Tom south, who says: "The most dreadful part of slavery, to my mind, it its outrages on the feelings and affections,—the separating of families, for example."⁸ Stowe herself had lost a child to cholera in 1849, a searing experience that remained with her as she wrote the novel. "It was at his dying bed and at his grave that I learned what a poor slave mother may feel when her child is torn from her. . . . Much that is in that book had its roots in the awful scenes and sorrows of that summer."⁹ Again, in case any obtuse reader of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* missed the point, Stowe supplied it explicitly in the dialogue. "Ma'am," says Eliza to Mrs. Bird, to whose home the escaping slave mother had been taken after crossing the ice, "have you ever lost a child?" Mrs. Bird breaks down in tears. "Why do you ask

that? I have lost a little one." Eliza replies: "Then you will feel for me. I have lost two, one after another,—left 'em buried there when I came away; and I had only this one left . . . and, ma'am, they were going to take him away from me,—to *sell* him,—sell him down south, ma'am, to go all alone,—a baby that had never been away from his mother in his life! I could n't stand it, ma'am."¹⁰

Nor could Stowe's readers in the 1850s stand it. By the first half the twentieth century, though, tastes had changed, and many potential readers could not stand what they considered the mawkish sentimentality and didacticism of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The deathbed scenes of Little Eva, Tom's pious homilies, the sprawling plot with its contrived coincidences, the author's preachy asides, and other conventional devices of Victorian popular fiction turned off literary critics and readers alike. After remaining continuously in print for seventy years, the novel went out of print until republished in a Modern Library edition in 1948. Its image, meanwhile, had been smirched by the ubiquitous "Tom Shows" on stage and in vaudeville, which caricatured Stowe's original plot and characters.

During the first half of the twentieth century the climate of scholarly and popular opinion toward the history of slavery, abolition, and the South also tended to discredit the novel. Historians as well as novelists and filmmakers portrayed slavery as a benign institution, abolitionists as irresponsible fanatics who provoked an unnecessary war, and the Old South as a stately civilization unjustly victimized and destroyed by the Civil War. Harriet Beecher Stowe was said to have known nothing of slavery, never to have visited the South, and to have drawn her scenes and characters entirely from her fevered abolitionist imagination. *Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind* replaced *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as America's paradigmatic image of the Civil War era.

All this has changed since the 1950s. Slavery is now seen as oppressive, exploitative, the tragic flaw in American society; the ante-

7. There have been many editions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, all with different paginations. Unless otherwise indicated, citations in this essay will be to the Vintage Books/the Library of America edition (New York, 1991). This quotation is from pp. 119–20.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 150.

9. Quoted in Reynolds, *Uncle Tom's Cabin and Mid-Nineteenth Century United States*, p. 145.

10. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, p. 105.

bellum South pursued a defensive-aggressive political strategy that led to secession and war; the abolitionists were courageous progressives; the North's cause in the Civil War was just; the abolition of slavery and destruction of the Old South were the great positive results of that war. In this changed climate of opinion, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has blossomed again as a work of great social importance and even of literary merit.

Having read and enjoyed the novel as a high school student in the 1950s, I experienced the disillusionment of a hypercritical college student whose professors convinced me that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was maudlin pulp and that I should concentrate on Hawthorne and Melville and other *real* novelists of that era. I can still recall the thrill of rediscovery, a half-dozen years later in the mid-1960s, when I read Edmund Wilson's penetrating and appreciative essay on Harriet Beecher Stowe in *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War*: "To expose oneself in maturity to *Uncle Tom* may therefore prove a startling experience. It is a much more impressive work than one has ever been allowed to suspect."¹¹ My initial instinct had not been wrong after all! I returned to the book in my own "maturity" and found it as exciting and meaningful as Wilson did.

Since then a whole army of literary critics have reevaluated *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. A half-dozen books of serious and balanced criticism, several new biographies of Stowe, many articles, and numerous modern editions of the novel have appeared during the past thirty years. It is now clear that Stowe knew more about slavery than earlier critics allowed. Eighteen years' residence in Cincinnati had brought her into contact with many fugitives who had fled across the river from Kentucky; she had visited a Kentucky plantation herself; one of her brothers had lived in Louisiana, and he furnished Stowe with material that provided the basis for Simon Legree and his plantation. Although, like all novelists, she drew on a fertile imagination for incidents and characters, many of these—including Topsy, whose

whimsical personality was similar to that of a black girl Stowe taught in Sunday school—were also drawn from real events and people.¹²

There has been a countervailing trend to these positive reevaluations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Many modern readers, especially blacks, are put off by the overtones of racism in Stowe's portrayal of black characteristics. Most important, they are angered by Uncle Tom himself, whose apparent fawning servility toward white oppressors has made the phrase "Uncle Tom" a hissing byword among African-Americans.¹³

It is true that Stowe shared the racial preconceptions common among many whites and even some blacks of her time, an attitude that historian George Fredrickson has labeled "romantic racialism." She depicted the "Anglo-Saxon race" as "hard and dominant," an unemotional, aggressive, enterprising people whose technological and economic skills enabled them to dominate nonwhite races. The African, by contrast, was an "imaginative and impassioned" race, "not naturally daring and enterprising, but home-loving and affectionate," a "kindly race" with an appreciation of music and beauty. The Caucasian was, in a word, a "masculine" race, the Negro a "feminine" and childlike people.¹⁴

Little wonder that blacks today find this unpalatable. But Stowe's romantic racialism had another dimension. These "African" traits of

12. In addition to works already cited, see E. Bruce Kirkham, *The Building of Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Knoxville, 1977); Elizabeth Ammons, ed., *Critical Essays on Harriet Beecher Stowe* (Boston, 1980); Thomas F. Gossett, *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture* (Dallas, 1985); Eric J. Sundquist, ed., *New Essays on Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York, 1986); Josephine Donovan, *Uncle Tom's Cabin: Evil, Affliction, and Redemptive Love* (Boston, 1991); Johanna Johnston, *Runaway to Heaven: The Story of Harriet Beecher Stowe* (New York, 1963); Edward C. Wagenknecht, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: The Known and the Unknown* (New York, 1965).

13. Howard C. Furnas, *Goodbye to Uncle Tom* (New York, 1956).

14. George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York, 1971), chap. 4; *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, pp. 42, 93, 118, 176.

11. (New York, 1962), p. 5.

“childlike simplicity of affection, and facility of forgiveness,” she wrote, “exhibit the highest form of the peculiarly *Christian* life.” For Stowe and many of her readers, Christian virtues were the highest virtues. The meek shall inherit the earth. A little child shall lead them. In the better world to come, the African traits would prove *superior* to those of the Anglo-Saxon. In what really counted for Stowe and the Christian culture of which she was a part, African-Americans were a finer race than white Americans, just as women and children had a finer nature than men. “The African race has peculiarities,” says one of Stowe’s characters, who speaks for the author, “yet to be unfolded in the light of civilization and Christianity, which, if not the same with those of the Anglo-Saxon, may prove to be, morally, of even a higher type.”¹⁵

This idea is the key to Uncle Tom’s character. He was not the obsequious bootlicker of prevailing image, which in any case derives mostly from the vulgarization of Tom by eighty years of Tom Shows on stage and vaudeville. The common opprobrium of Uncle Tomism, it seems safe to say, is expressed by people who have not read the book—or at least have not understood it. In Christian terms, Tom is by far the strongest character in the novel. Indeed, he is a Christ figure. Tom forgives his oppressors; so did Jesus. Tom turns the other cheek to blows; so did Jesus. Tom blesses those who curse him; so did Jesus. Tom prays for those who sin against him; so did Jesus. In Christian theology, Christ gave his life to save humankind; in Stowe’s novel, Tom gives his life to save his people.

At the very outset, we learn that Tom’s owner must sell him to satisfy debts that would otherwise sink the plantation and cause the sale of all the slaves. When his wife urges Tom, like Eliza, to flee north instead of waiting to be sold south, he replies: “If I must be sold, or all the people on the place, and everything go to rack, why, let me be sold. . . . It’s better for me alone to go, than to break up the place and sell all. Mas’r an’t to blame, Chloe.” At the climax of

15. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, pp. 213, 503.

the novel, when Legree literally beats Tom to death because he refuses to tell what he knows of Cassy and Emmy’s hiding place, the parallel between Christ’s crucifixion and Tom’s death must be clear to all but the most obtuse reader:

Tom opened his eyes, and looked upon his master. “Ye poor miserable critter!” he said, “there an’t no more ye can do! I forgive ye, with all my soul!” and he fainted entirely away. . . . Tom stood perfectly submissive; and yet Legree could not hide from himself that his power over his bond thrall was somehow gone. . . . He understood full well that it was god who was standing, between him and his victim. . . . That submissive and silent man, whom no taunts, nor threats, nor stripes, nor cruelties, could disturb, roused a voice within him, such as of old his Master roused in the demoniac soul, saying, “What have we to do with thee, thou Jesus of Nazareth?”¹⁶

Stowe’s readers lived in an age that understood this message better than ours does. But the triumph of another nonviolent Christian movement a century later caused a modern commentator, Howard Mumford Jones, to compare Uncle Tom, “this splendid black Christian Prometheus,” to “the Christianity of Martin Luther King, Jr.” Jones also compared Uncle Tom as a classic figure in literature to Victor Hugo’s Jean Valjean: “The important difference between *Les Misérables* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is not one between a white hero and a black hero; it is that in Hugo’s novel we witness the conversion of the hero to Christian selflessness, whereas in Mrs. Stowe’s, the conversion having already been made, we witness a series of tests whether the hero can endure until he dies.”¹⁷

Readers must decide for themselves whether *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* equals *Les Misérables* as a work of literature. Most will probably decide that it does not. But as a work of social reform, its success was

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 55, 459, 481.

17. Jones, introduction to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Columbus, Ohio, 1969), pp. vi–vii.

greater. A decade later, many young men who had read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* marched off to war with the words written by another Yankee woman ringing in their ears:

*As He died to make men holy,
Let us die to make men free.*

3

THE WAR OF SOUTHERN AGGRESSION

"SOUTH CAROLINA," WROTE ONE OF THE STATE'S FEW OPPONENTS of secession in 1860, "is too small for a republic, but too large for an insane asylum."¹ In earlier years most Southerners outside the Palmetto State would have agreed. In 1832 no other state joined South Carolina in its "nullification" of a national tariff law that Carolina planters viewed as discriminatory against plantation agriculture. On that occasion the Carolina planters and their allies backed down rather than face the wrath of President Andrew Jackson, who vowed to send in the army and hang the ringleaders of nullification. Again in 1851 they had to contain their zeal for a separate slaveholding republic when other Southern states refused to secede in protest against the Compromise of 1850, which had admitted California as a free state. But on their third try, in 1860, South Carolina's Southern Rights radicals pulled ten other slave states into secession.

The catalyst that turned what some called the Palmetto insane

1. James L. Petrigru to Benjamin F. Perry, December 8, 1860, quoted in Lacey K. Ford, Jr., *Origins of Southern Radicalism: The South Carolina Upcountry, 1800-1860* (New York, 1988), p. 371.